The North Africa Project

The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership

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The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States government has significantly enhanced its level of engagement with African governments. There is a growing recognition in Washington policy circles that the social and economic instability plaguing Africa is a strategic concern for the United States. In response, the Department of Defense has collaborated with the Department of State to develop the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which supports African states' efforts to improve border security and counterterrorism capacity while also facilitating regional cooperation, promoting democratic governance, and improving relations with the United States.[1]

BACKGROUND

Levels of modernization and development vary enormously among the countries of North Africa and the Sahel.[2] Many of the states in this region have stable authoritarian governments while others have been plagued by violence and instability. There are a few fledgling democracies, including Niger. Tribal structures are still the primary political unit in many areas that have never been under the control of a central government. Local authorities have had little success controlling terrorists operating in desert terrain that is extremely difficult to monitor, making this region an excellent example of what the Pentagon calls "ungoverned space."

The region's economies are fragile, relying on inefficient state-owned industries and subsistence agriculture, and they are undermined further by the large volume of black market activity. For some individuals, criminal activity—particularly smuggling—has been a gateway to direct participation in terrorism Violent extremist groups target unemployed and underemployed young men for recruitment into terrorist organizations. These disenfranchised youth are vulnerable to ideologies that offer simple solutions to their problems and promise great rewards for their participation. If the economic situation in Africa continues to stagnate, association with extremist groups will become more appealing for both financial and ideological reasons.

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM IN AFRICA

North Africa is home to a number of terrorist groups whose increasingly international activities have generated concern in Washington as well as European capitals. These groups are supported by overlapping financial, logistical, and operational networks in Europe. North

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[1] Rear Admiral Hamlin B. Tallent, USN, Director, European Plans and Operations Center United States European Command in testimony before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Non-Proliferation (March 10, 2005).

[2] For the purpose of this article, "North Africa" or "the Maghreb" includes Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, while "the Sahel" includes Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad.

African terrorist groups also contract transnational criminal associates to provide logistical support, and at times the difference between terrorist and criminal groups is marginal. For example, European-based terrorist cells may generate revenue for North African groups through credit card fraud and other kinds of petty crime. The growing involvement of North Africans in international terrorism has led to a recent focus on North Africa and the Sahel as a potential "safe haven" for terrorists.

The most active terrorist groups in the region include the Algerian al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM (formerly known as the GSPC, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat[3]), and the GICM (Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group). Of these, AQIM/GSPC has generated the most concern in Washington. In 2003, the GSPC kidnapped 32 European tourists and held them for several months before (reportedly) extracting a €5 million ransom from the German government. After releasing the hostages, the leader of the GSPC cell, a former Algerian paratrooper named Amari Saifi (whose nom de guerre is "El Para") led his band of fighters on a running gun battle that began in Mali, transited Niger, and ended in Chad.[4] Although the GSPC was nominally an Algerian nationalist organization, El Para's band of jihadists included fighters from other North African and Sahelian countries. The United States European Combatant Command (EUCOM) provided support to regional armies as they pursued El Para across the desert. Soldiers from Mali, Algeria, Niger, and Chad participated in the manhunt before El Para was eventually captured by a Chadian rebel group called the Movement for Democracy and Justice[5] which repatriated El Para to Algeria.

Other AQIM/GSPC cells have reportedly trained fighters for combat or suicide missions in Iraq, and in the last five years, al-Qa'ida has sent a number of emissaries to North Africa with the intention of unifying the various local terrorist groups.[6] The GSPC openly declared its allegiance to al-Qa'ida in 2004,[7] and GSPC cells have been discovered in Italy, France, Spain, the

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3 On January 24, 2007, the GSPC issued a communiqué declaring that it would henceforth be known as The Organization of Al Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (تنظيمُ القاعدةِ ببلادِ المْغربِ الإسلامي).

4 Salima Tlemcani, "The Enigmatic Case of Abderrazak the Para: Revelations about the Career of a Terrorist Leader," Algiers El Watan (April 10, 2006), GMP200604100380006, accessed May 10, 2006, http://www.opensource.gov.

5 Andrew Koch, "U.S. to Bolster Counter-Terrorism Assistance to Africa," Jane's Defence Weekly (October 6, 2004).

6 Stephen Ulph, "al-Qaeda Networks Uncovered in Morocco," Terrorism Focus 2(23) (December 13, 2005). Last accessed January 20, 2006, http://www.jamestown.org. "Al-Hayah Cites Detainees on Moroccan Al Qaida Group that Enlists Volunteers for Iraq," GMP20051129702002 London Al-Hayah in Arabic (November 29, 2005): 21. Accessed December 22, 2005, http://www.fbis.gov. "Moroccan Paper on Attempt to Set Up Al Qa'ida Base in North Africa," GMP20060214710022 Rabat al-Alam in Arabic (February 13, 2006). Accessed March 22, 2006, http://www.fbis.gov.

7 John C.K. Daly, "Libya and al-Qaeda: A Complex Relationship," Terrorism Monitor 3(6) (March 24, 2005). Last accessed March 8, 2006, http://www.jamestown.org. In 2004, militant Islamic Web sites circulated a declaration that purported to announce the creation of a new al Qaeda affiliate, Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Berber (Organization of al Qaeda in the Land of the Berbers), which was followed several months later by a similar announcement for Qa'idat al-Jihad fi al-Jaza'ir (Organization of al Qaeda in Algeria).

United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Canada.[8] Other North African groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group also have connections to the global jihad. Because these groups do not publicize their activities, much less is known about the scope of their operations and capabilities. North African terrorists have been responsible for attacks in Madrid and Casablanca and plots have been disrupted in Italy, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom.[9] These groups' memberships are not limited by national origin, and AQIM in particular is increasingly filling its ranks with non-Algerian recruits.[10] The countries of North Africa and the Sahel have responded aggressively to the terrorist groups' activities, but the physical territory in question is so vast (and the underlying socioeconomic conditions so dire) that external assistance and coordination is necessary.

THE TRANS-SAHARA COUNTERTERRORISM PARTNERSHIP (TSCTP)

The primary objectives of the *National Strategy for Combating Terror* are to preserve and promote free and open societies, defeat terrorist extremism, and create a global environment that is inhospitable to terrorists.[11] Two cornerstones of this strategy are expanding the capacity of foreign partners to combat terrorism and reducing ideological support for terrorism. For the strategy to succeed in Africa, the United States will need to help African governments provide viable social and economic opportunities to their people, thereby "disaggregating" the local conditions that lead to social unrest from the extremist ideology that facilitates terrorist activity.

The TSCTP[12] addresses this challenge through a combination of military-to-military security assistance and development programs that aim to reduce support for violent extremism. At its most basic level, the TSCTP seeks to reduce the impact of terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel, and thereby reduce the terrorist threat to the United States. The TSCTP's military elements will increase the capacity of participating countries to identify and respond to internal security threats. Development assistance will address the social and economic issues that facilitate the spread of extremist and violent organizations and ideologies. Finally, public outreach campaigns will promote democratic institutions and values while building positive impressions of the United States. This is an ambitious program with enormous potential, but it has a great number of moving parts and a complicated budget structure. It is also a work in progress, whose success or failure rests on the ability of individuals to overcome the inherent bureaucratic hurdles described below.

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8 "Report Details Contacts between Algeria's Salafi Group, Syria's Jund al-Sham," GMP20051208700002 London Al-Hayah (Internet version) in Arabic (December 8, 2005). Accessed March 21, 2006, http://www.fbis.gov. John C.K. Daly, "Libya and al-Qaeda: A Complex Relationship," Terrorism Monitor 3(6) (March 24, 2005). Accessed March 8, 2006, http://www.jamestown.org.

9 "Italy: Three Alleged Terrorists Arrested Suspected of Planning Attack in Italy," EUP200511170580005 Milan Il Giornale (Internet version) in Italian (November 17, 2005). Accessed November 18, 2005, http://www.fbis.gov.

10 "Algeria's Salafists Recruit Members in Maghreb, Sahel Regions," FEA20060327021388—FBIS Feature—1153 GMT (March 27, 2006). Accessed March 30, 2006, http://www.fbis.gov.

11 Online at http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006.

12 The program was initially called the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative, or TSCTI.

The TSCTP is an extension of the earlier Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), which began in 2003 with a 2-year budget of $7.75 million provided by the State Department.[13] The PSI allocated $6.25 million during its first year to conduct training and capacity building in Niger, Mali, Chad, and Mauritania.[14] Local military companies of approximately 100 men received training from U.S. Marines and Army Special Forces in basic marksmanship, planning, communications, land navigation, and patrolling.[15] Participating countries also received equipment such as night vision goggles and specially equipped sports utility vehicles. The PSI was judged to be a success by both U.S. officials and local participants, and EUCOM led the way in pushing for an expansion of the program.[16] The next iteration, the TSCTP, was expanded to include Algeria, Nigeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal, with officials leaving open the possibility that Libya could be included at a later date.

Previous training programs sponsored by the United States included the Africa Response Force, the African Crisis Initiative, Operation Focus Relief, the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance, the Coastal Security Program, and the Global Peace Operations Initiative.[17] Most of these emphasized peacekeeping operations rather than offensive capabilities. The TSCTP does not indicate a policy shift away from support for peacekeeping operations, but rather, seeks to provide a supplementary set of skills to countries with internal security concerns and populations considered "at-risk" for their potential to support terrorism.

The budget for TSCTP is roughly $100 million per year, beginning in 2007 and continuing through 2013. The program budget is made up of a combination of funds requested by the Department of State, USAID, and the Department of Defense. The TSCTP has been supplemented by "Section 1206" and "Section 1207" funds, which provide the Secretaries of State and Defense with spending authority to jointly implement programs to build capacity in partner nations by providing training and equipment to foreign military forces.[18] The majority

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13 First Lt. Phillip Ulmer, "Special Operations Command Europe Trains African Soldiers," Press release, March 4, 2004, Headquarters United States European Command. Accessed June 1, 2006, http://www.eucom.mil/english/FullStory.asp?art=367. "Stripes' Q&A on DOD's Pan Sahel Initiative," Stars and Stripes 5 (April 5, 2004). Accessed June 5, 2006, http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=20669&archive=true. Detailed figures are cited in the International Crisis Group Report "Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?" Africa Report No. 92, which indicated that Congress approved $6.25 million in FY2004, with just over half of that money going to Mali, leaving $1.7 million for Niger, and $500,000 each for Mauritania and Chad. This money was distributed through EUCOM, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and contractors.

14 Donna Miles, "New Counterterrorism Initiative to Focus on Saharan Africa," American Forces Press Service (May 16, 2005), http://www.defense.gov/news/May2005/20050516.html. Accessed January 20, 2006.

15 It was during this series of trainings that El Para staged his kidnapping, and thus attracted the attention of U.S. forces on the ground.

16 Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "As Africans Join Iraqi Insurgency, U.S. Counters with Military Training in Their Lands," New York Times (June 10, 2005).

17 International Crisis Group Report, "Islamic Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction," Africa Report No. 92 (March 31, 2005).

18 The 2006 fiscal year had a much smaller budget, as it was essentially a bridge between the PSI and the TSCTP. Sebastian Sprenger, "First Phase of Sahara Anti-Terror Effort Could Wrap Up Next Summer," Inside the Pentagon 22(17) (April 27, 2006); see also Jason Motlagh, "U.S. Seeks to Secure Sahara Desert; Terror Potential Cited In Lawless, Struggling Area," The Washington Times (November 17, 2005); see also "U.S. looks for Deeper African Engagement," Jane's Defence Weekly (July 6, 2005).

of the TSCTP budget will be spent on development initiatives such as improving health and education, building community centers, providing vocational training, supporting girls' scholarship funds, promoting transparency in governance, and providing support and training for community radio stations.[19] Embassy teams work with EUCOM and USAID personnel to determine the package of development programs that will match the goals of the TSCTP to the needs of the host country.

Public diplomacy and public affairs messages are critical in ensuring that local populations recognize that the TSCTP programs are sponsored by the United States. To this end, the TSCTP has fielded Military Information Support Teams (MIST) and Civil Military Support Elements (CMSE), two program elements that were created during the PSI. These teams' mission is to generate support for the United States and for moderate Islamic viewpoints while reducing sympathy and support for terrorism, boosting the Embassies' efforts in this area by providing additional human and financial resources.[20] Specific programs range from capacity-building seminars for local militaries to the promotion of moderate authors and textbooks for local schools. These relatively low-cost initiatives are a deliberate means of showcasing American engagement in the region, and it is hoped that such programs will build lasting goodwill toward the United States.

The TSCTP is nested within EUCOM's Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans Sahara (OEF-TS), which seeks to enable partner nations to effectively control terrorism within their borders. The military aspects of the TSCTP/OEF-TS include the basic infantry training described earlier, but also incorporate more advanced counterterrorism capabilities such as improving communication systems and developing mechanisms for regional intelligence sharing. EUCOM is sponsoring regional conferences of defense ministers and military intelligence chiefs in order to build trust among them and to demonstrate the advantages of cooperation. EUCOM will also work to develop more effective command and control mechanisms by enhancing tactical communications capability. A key element of the military to military engagement will be promoting professionalism and deference to civilian authority while also creating positive impressions of American military personnel.

AFRICAN STATES' RESPONSE TO THE TSCTP

Regional governments have their own motives for participating in U.S. policy initiatives, of course, and some critics of the TSCTP have suggested that the amount of money flowing to the region has encouraged African governments to exaggerate the scope of their terrorist problems. At the same time, the TSCTP offers a means of creating a closer bilateral relationship with the United States, and many regional militaries are keen to earn the prestige associated with joint military exercises with American troops. Underlying these complex motivations is an essential difference of opinion between the United States and African governments over the nature of the terrorist threat in Africa. The United States is most concerned about the phenomenon of

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19 "Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?" Africa Report No. 92 (March 31, 2005), International Crisis Group.

20 Comments gathered from U.S. officials between 2006 and 2007 are reflected here, without attribution, as per the officials' agreement.

international terrorism, whereas most African officials are preoccupied with terrorism that poses a threat to *domestic* security.

These perspectives are not incompatible, but the differences must be taken into account if U.S. policies in the region are to be successful. Each state's needs vary enormously, and the Department of State, Department of Defense, and USAID are working closely with the host countries to determine the appropriate individualized package of training and capacity-building for each state. This process will be critical to the success of the TSCTP, and the final outcomes of the program will then depend on the ability of each country team to coordinate its execution with EUCOM and the host country counterparts.

Initial local response to the PSI program in Mali, Chad, and Niger was positive, and these countries' experience no doubt helped lay the groundwork for the expansion of the program. Regional governments are obviously most interested in participating in a program that meets their needs—one with an appropriate balance of military operations and development initiatives. For example, there is a significant difference in the internal security capacity of the North African states as compared to the Sahelian states. The state institutions of the Maghreb countries—including judicial, police, and military capabilities—are much more developed and professionalized than those of the Sahelian states. North African and Sahelian states have therefore responded differently to United States and European policy initiatives.

By way of example, Morocco's response to the TSCTP/OEF-TS has been complicated by the inclusion of its historical rival Algeria. Morocco has traditionally been the United States' closest ally in North Africa, and some in Morocco feel that the special relationship between the two countries is threatened by the United States' recent interest in improving ties with Algeria. Additionally, the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces already possess the basic infantry skills that are the core of the OEF-TS training (and some observers believe that the Moroccan military poses a greater potential threat to the survival of the current regime than do the Islamists). The Moroccan government might find greater utility in programs that would enhance law enforcement capacity or provide support in revising the criminal code so as to facilitate criminal prosecution of terrorist-related activity.

BUREAUCRATIC PITFALLS AND ALTERNATE APPROACHES
Within the U.S. government, there is disagreement over both the sources of social instability and the sort of policy solutions that are most suitable to address them. Some American officials are concerned that the TSCTP's emphasis on terrorist threats will not address the chronic problem of underdevelopment, and may in fact exacerbate anti-American sentiment by strengthening the capabilities of local security services, which could then be used to quell domestic opposition to the regimes in power. These critics have argued that the United States' association with these regimes will create resentment among civilian populations while doing nothing to improve the social conditions that facilitate terrorism.

Particular aspects of the TSCTP may be politically sensitive, and it is important that the Embassies remain the primary communication channel with the host country and the local media. For example, the United States has assisted the Algerian government in expanding its physical military infrastructure in the south of the country. Local press reports immediately suggested that the U.S. was constructing a secret intelligence base in the desert. In a media environment that is rife with rumor, everyone involved with the TSCTP must ensure that its program activities are not misinterpreted by edgy local populations. Suspicion, distrust, or confusion about the nature of the TSCTP will undermine the program's goal of reducing radicalism and anti-American sentiment.

In the end, the effectiveness of the TSCTP will depend on the ability of the Departments of State and Defense to cooperate both in Washington and on the ground in the TSCTP countries. The phrase "interagency cooperation" has often been considered an oxymoron, yet the success of the TSCTP depends on the presence of effective, ongoing collaboration among the participating agencies. Coordination on the ground between the various parts of the country teams and EUCOM personnel are currently often a matter of ad hoc coordination based on personal relationships. If the country teams believe that the TSCTP is a worthy initiative, they will leverage their local contacts to facilitate coordination with the host country. Conversely, if the Ambassador or other key players in the local embassy do not support the TSCTP, reluctant support (or outright opposition) would prevent its execution.

The United States' response to the growing concern over security in Africa is further complicated by the profusion of agencies within the U.S. government that have some involvement with Africa, and the lack of any standard geographic delineations of responsibility among them. Until recently, the Pentagon divided responsibility for Africa among three different regional commands—European Command, Central Command, and Pacific Command—whose geographic divisions do not match the organization of the regional desks of the Department of State.

There is reason to hope that interagency relationships may improve in the years to come. The Department of State has developed a Regional Security Initiative (RSI), which is meant to help Embassies identify and address key counterterrorism concerns on a regional basis. The RSI should facilitate cooperation between partner nations and foster greater local collaboration with European and NATO allies. Additionally, on February 6th of 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the creation of a new geographic command for Africa that will consolidate responsibility for Africa into one organization. There is a risk that the TSCTP might lose momentum during transfer of command from EUCOM to the new entity (although it is likely that the same staff will continue to manage the program on a day-to-day basis).

It is far too early to judge the success of the TSCTP, but the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) provides an interesting example of a multilateral initiative that has successfully integrated security and humanitarian goals into a single mission. Based in Djibouti, the CJTF-HOA was originally conceived as a U.S. Marine Corps mission to disrupt

terrorism in the Horn of Africa.[21]   Beginning in 2002, special operations forces and CIA personnel have conducted a range of antiterrorist activities such as the Predator strike against an al-Qa'ida target in Yemen in 2002, and the provision of support to the Ethiopian army's recent actions against the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia.[22] However, the bulk of the American personnel stationed at Camp Lemonier—currently numbering around 1,500—work with French, British, Dutch, Romanian, and Korean partners on humanitarian missions such as digging wells, repairing schools, clinics, and hospitals, and conducting medical and veterinary clinics.[23] CJTF-HOA has worked with USAID to coordinate its efforts with local NGOs, which are slowly overcoming their initial mistrust of the military's intentions in the region.[24] CJTF-HOA's strong record with multilateral interdisciplinary projects is a good indicator for TSCTP's prospects for success.

European nations have also been providing counterterrorism training and assistance to African countries. European countries have traditionally had close relationships with their former colonies, providing the bulk of foreign training and arms. Although European countries may be reluctant to acknowledge the growing U.S. role in Africa, it would be more efficient and effective for the NATO allies to coordinate joint security training initiatives rather than to simply participate in each other's programs. European countries (especially those with colonial-era ties) may have a closer understanding of the subtleties of the local political and cultural contexts, and in many cases, senior European officials have longstanding personal relationships with their counterparts in North Africa and the Sahel. Everyone—including the African partner states—stands to gain from greater coordination among interested parties.

CONCLUSION
Reducing the current level of terrorist activity is in part a function of destroying existing terrorist networks and preventing their regeneration. However, the threat of terrorism cannot be eliminated strictly through military actions and law enforcement. A lasting reduction in terrorist violence requires changes in the current social and economic environment in Africa. Terrorist activity will be unappealing only when the cost of participation outweighs the benefits, and this requires that regional governments provide social and economic opportunities for their people.

A true measure of success for the TSCTP and future programs will be whether or not regional cooperation outlasts the program itself. Should the TSCTP be successful in improving local

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21 The Horn of Africa is defined by U.S. Central Command as Somalia, Yemen, Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti

22 US News and World Report (September 28, 2003). Accessed May 15, 2006,

   http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=926&ncid=959&e=2u=/usnews/20030929/ts_usnews/paxamericana.

23 "Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa," Global Security.org. Accessed May 15, 2006, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/cjtf-hoa.htm. Jim

   Garamone, "Combined Force Exhibits New Type of Warfare," American Forces Press Services (August 18, 2005).

24 Jim Garamone, "Admiral Cites Complexity in Horn of Africa Mission," American Forces Press Service (April 24, 2006).

capacity to respond to internal *and* external threats, and should increased regional interaction be sustained once the U.S. advisors have returned home, then the program will have demonstrated the value of a coordinated regional approach to security and provided a model for future security policy for the United States, its allies, and partners.

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